Chinese astronauts return to Earth after vessel damaged by space debris

BEIJING: Three Chinese astronauts whose return to Earth was delayed by space debris hitting their vessel last week landed in China on Friday afternoon, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

China Manned Space Agency (CMSA) revealed details about the debris damage for the first time on Friday, saying "tiny cracks" were found in a small window of the Shenzhou-20 spacecraft's return capsule.

"The capsule does not meet the safety requirements for a crewed return, Shenzhou-20 will remain in orbit and conduct relevant experiments," the agency said in a statement.

The astronauts were due to return to Earth nine days ago after completing a six-month mission on China's permanently inhabited Tiangong space station, a programme known as Shenzhou, or "Divine Vessel", when the crack was discovered.

The crew left Tiangong on another spacecraft, the Shenzhou-21, according to CMSA, touching down at the Dongfeng landing site in north China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.

The mission began in April and went smoothly until the debris incident forced the Shenzhou-20's return, originally scheduled for November 5, to be postponed, CMSA said. The delay, while only nine days, was highly unusual for a programme that had run like clockwork and in the past year reached new milestones, with the deployment of astronauts born in the 1990s, a world-record spacewalk, and plans to send the first foreign astronaut, from Pakistan, to Tiangong next year.—Reuters

Water shortage pushes Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan into energy crisis

DUSHANBE: Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are facing an energy crisis as water levels have plummeted at the reservoirs powering their largest hydropower stations, officials said this week.

The two landlocked Central Asian countries are heavily reliant on hydropower. Both use massive Soviet-built hydropower plants for their domestic electricity output.

The water level in the reservoir connected to Tajikistan's Nurek power plant has dropped by 2.47 metres (8.1 feet) over the last year, the state utility firm said on Friday.

The Tajik Ministry of Energy and Water Resources had said on Thursday that the situation there was alarming.

In neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, the reservoir feeding Toktogul hydroelectric plant has lost two billion cubic metres (70.6 billion cubic feet) — around 20 percent — over the past year, President Sadyr Japarov said earlier this week.

Restaurants in Kyrgyzstan have been ordered since Thursday to close at 10 pm, and public establishments must switch off lights by 6pm to save power.

Tajik authorities said officials who failed to stop an "irrational" use of electricity would be fired.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, both countries have experienced periodic power cuts, especially in winter, despite attempts to renovate ailing energy infrastructure.—AFP

BRAZIL's Environment Minister Marina Silva (centre-left), COP30 chief Andre Correa do Lago (centre) and Minister for Indigenous Peoples Sonia Guajajara (centre-right), meet representatives of Munduruku and Pataxo groups during the UN Climate Change Conference in Belem.—AFP

Six killed in massive Russian attack on Kyiv

Oil export suspended as Ukraine bombs port in retaliation

KYIV: Russia carried out one of the biggest drone and missile attacks on the Ukrainian capital on Friday, killing six people in Kyiv and two more in the south in strikes on energy facilities, apartment buildings and infrastructure.

A missile also struck Azerbaijan's embassy, damaging its walls and prompting Baku to lodge a protest with Moscow.

President Volodymyr Zelensky said Russian forces used 430 drones and 18 missiles and Kyiv was responding with long-range strikes.

In retaliatory strikes, Ukraine launched drone attacks on Russia's Black Sea port of Novorossiysk, damaging a refinery. Russia halted oil exports from the port, pushing international oil prices by two dollars per barrel.

Ukrainian officials said most of the Russian drones and missiles were shot down, but falling debris and fires damaged high-rise apartments, a school, a medical facility and administrative buildings across nine districts in the city of about three million.

Anastasia, 29, described the moment her apartment block was hit: "At that moment you don't know what to do first: save yourself, your child, or run to help people, because so many people were screaming and needed help."

City officials said that six people were killed in Kyiv, which was the focus of the attacks. Russian drones also struck the Black Sea city of Chornomorsk, killing two people.

"Only pressure with sanctions and strength can force Russia to end this war, a war that no one but them ever needed," Zelensky said.

Russia's defence ministry said its troops hit Ukrainian energy facilities and weapons-production complex with high-precision weapons to respond to Ukrainian attacks on Russia.

Flames rose over various sites in Kyiv during the night as several waves of Russian drone and missile attacks hit and photographs also showed people huddled in rubble-strewn streets outside their apartment buildings.

Russia's Black Sea port of Novorossiysk temporarily suspended oil exports, equivalent to 2.2 million barrels per day, or two per cent of global supply, on Friday after a Ukrainian missile and drone attack.

The attack was one of the biggest on Russian oil-exporting infrastructure in recent months. It followed a ramping-up of Ukrainian strikes on Russian oil refineries since August, part of an attempt by Kyiv to degrade Moscow's ability to finance its war.

Global oil prices rallied by more than two per cent on supply fears after the attack.

Long-range Ukrainian air and sea drone strikes have repeatedly disrupted Russian oil infrastructure this year, targeting Baltic and Black Sea ports, a trunk pipeline system, and a number of oil refineries.

Ukraine's military said its forces had fired Neptune cruise missiles and used various types of strike drones in the attack on Novorossiysk "as part of efforts to reduce the military and economic potential of the Russian aggressor".

Ukraine said it separately struck an oil refinery in Russia's Saratov region and a fuel storage facility in nearby Engels overnight.— Reuters

Indigenous protesters block entrance to COP30 summit

BELEM: Dozens of Indigenous protesters blocked the front of the COP30 summit venue in Brazil on Friday morning, staging a sit-in that forced delegates to use a side entrance to resume their negotiations on tackling climate change.

Security guards stepped up checks during the peaceful protest, and delegates formed long lines waiting to enter the sprawling compound, which is built on the site of an old airport in the Amazon city of Belem.

The venue is hosting the annual UN climate conference where delegates from 195 governments are seeking to secure progress on halting the rise in global temperatures that threatens delicate and essential ecosystems, including the Amazon rainforest.

The protesters are demanding that the Brazilian government halt development projects in the Amazon, including mining, logging, oil drilling and the building of a new railway for transporting mining and agricultural products.

"President Lula, we are here in front of COP because we want you to listen to us. We refuse to be sacrificed for agribusiness," read a statement from the Munduruku Indigenous group that carried out the protest.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has highlighted Indigenous communities as key players in this year's COP30 negotiations. The Munduruku territory covers nearly 24,000 square km (9,000 square miles), about the size of the US state of New Hampshire, in the heart of the Amazon rainforest in northern Brazil.

"We are the ones who protect the climate, and the Amazon cannot continue to be destroyed to enrich big companies," the Munduruku statement added.—Reuters

Trump asks Justice Dept to probe Epstein ties with Clinton

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump asked the US Department of Justice on Friday to investigate Jeffrey Epstein's alleged ties with JPMorgan and several prominent Democratic figures, including former president Bill Clinton.

The request comes after a congressional committee released thousands of documents that raised new questions about Trump's relationship with the convicted sex offender.

Along with Clinton, who socialised with the late financier in the early 2000s, Trump said he had asked the Justice Department to investigate former treasury secretary Larry Summers, and Reid Hoffman, the LinkedIn founder who is also a prominent Democratic donor.

"Epstein was a Democrat, and he is the Democrats' problem, not the Republicans problem!" he wrote on social media. "They all know about him, don't waste your time with Trump. I have a country to run!"

While nine in 10 Republicans say they approve of Trump's performance in the White House overall, just four in 10 say they approve of his handling of the Epstein files, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted last month.—Reuters

As AI data scrapers sap websites' revenues, some fight back

LISBON: A swarm of AI "crawlers" is running rampant on the internet, scouring billions of websites for data to feed algorithms at leading tech companies — all without permission or payment, upending the online economy.

Before the rise of AI chatbots, websites allowed search engines to access their content in return for increased visibility, a system that rewarded them with traffic and advertising revenues.

But the rapid development of generative AI has allowed tech giants like Google and OpenAI to harvest information for their chatbots with web crawlers, without humans ever needing to visit the original sites.

Traditional content producers, such as media outlets, are being outpaced by AI crawlers, which have cut into their online operations and advertising revenues.

"Sites that gave bots access to their content used to get readers in exchange," said Kurt Muehmel, head of AI strategy at data management firm Dataiku. But the arrival of generative AI "completely breaks" that model, he said.

Wikipedia's human internet traffic fell by eight percent between 2024 and 2025 because of a rise in AI search engine summaries, the online encyclopaedia reported last month.

"The fundamental tension is that the new business of the internet that is AI-driven doesn't generate traffic," said Matthew Prince, CEO of Cloudflare, an American internet services provider.

"It's basically like putting a speed limit sign or a no trespassing sign," Prince said on the sidelines of the Web Summit in Lisbon.

'No trespassing'

Cloudflare, which processes more than 20 percent of all internet traffic, announced this summer a new measure aimed at blocking AI crawlers from accessing content without payment or permission from website owners.

"Badly behaving bots can get by that, but we can track that... Over time, we can tighten these controls in a way that we're confident the AI companies can't get through." The measure, which applies to more than 10 million websites, has already "attracted the attention of artificial intelligence giants", he added.

On a smaller scale, American startup TollBit is providing online news publishers with tools to block, monitor, and monetise AI crawler traffic.

"The internet is a highway," said CEO and co-founder Toshit Panigrahi, who described the company as a "tollbooth on the internet".

TollBit works with more than 5,600 sites, including *USA Today*, *Time magazine*, and the *Associated Press*, allowing media outlets to set their own access fees for their content.

The analytics are free for publishers, but AI companies are charged a "transaction fee for every piece of content they access".

But for Muehmel, the online takeover by AI crawlers cannot be resolved with only "partial measures or by an individual company".

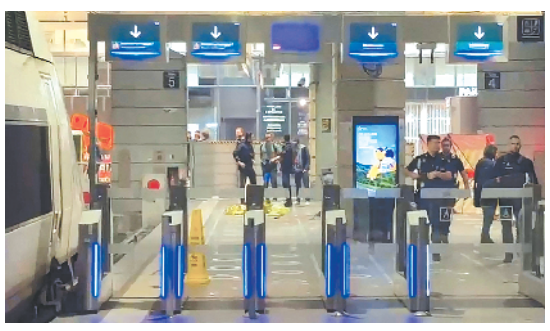
"This is an evolution of the entire internet economy, which will take years," he said.

If the bot swarm continues to roam freely online, "all of the incentives for content creation are going to go away," Prince said.

"That would be a loss, not just for us humans that want to consume it, but actually for the AI companies that need original content in order to train their systems."—AFP

NEWSMAKERS

CHENNAI: Captured stray dogs in cages during a mandatory microchipping drive for pet licensing and street dog registration at a government-run animal centre in India's Tamil Nadu state.—AFP



PARIS: Police patrol near a platform at Montparnasse train station after a policeman shot at a person armed with a knife. According to initial findings, "a man known for domestic violence had brandished a knife, and a police officer used his weapon to stop him", the prosecutor's office said.—AFP

SAN JOSE: Costa Rica's President Rodrigo Chaves appears at a hearing of an accountability commission to answer charges of "political belligerence and corruption". —AFP

PEOPLE pray for rain at Tehran's Imamzadeh Saleh shrine.—Reuters

Hundreds pray for rain as Iran battles drought

TEHRAN: Hundreds of people gathered on Friday at a mosque in northern Tehran to pray for rain, with Iran gripped by one of its worst droughts in decades.

Rainfall in the capital has this year been at its lowest level in a century, local officials say, and half of Iran's provinces have not seen a drop fall in months.

Faced with water shortages, the government has decided to cut off water supplies periodically to Tehran's 10-million-strong population to limit consumption.

On Friday, men and women gathered at the Emamzadeh Saleh mosque in the Iranian capital and said a special prayer to implore God for rain.

The women were veiled and prayed in a separate area from the men, in accordance with Islamic practice.

Tehran nestles on the southern slopes of the Alborz mountains and has hot, dry summers usually relieved by autumn rains and winter snowfall.

The mountain peaks, usually already covered in snow at this time of year, are still dry.

Tehran is by far the country's biggest city and its inhabitants use three million cubic metres of water per day, according to local media.

Last week, President Masoud Pezeshkian cautioned that without rainfall before winter, Tehran could face evacuation, though he did not elaborate.

The government later explained that Pezeshkian had only wanted to alert residents that the situation was serious and was not presenting a concrete plan.

Of the five major dams supplying drinking water in the capital, one is empty and another is at less than eight percent of capacity, officials say.—AFP

NICOSIA: A man rides a bicycle past the Selimiye Mosque in the Turkish-controlled northern part of Cyprus.—AFP

LONDON: Resident doctors from the British Medical Association picket outside St Thomas Hospital during the union's 13th strike in a pay dispute which began in March 2023.—Reuters